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Territorial Issues in the Sino-Soviet Dispute

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SUMMARY

Territorial issues along the PRC-USSR border reflect the overall Sino-Soviet dispute and have been used by both sides to vent it. Border talks—initiated in 1964, then broken off, and resumed in 1969—have failed to produce a settlement, a failure that results as much from Peking's inflexible conditions for negotiation as from the issues and territory actually in dispute. If a boundary settlement is finally concluded, no sizable territorial exchanges are expected. Although all major territorial issues have already been publicized, less important sovereignty problems could arise and demarcation or redemarcation of the lengthy border might prove troublesome.

Territorial problems include, first, those arising from undefined river boundaries in the eastern border sector, where no agreement exists on the allocation of several hundred islands. A second category of problems, applicable principally to the Pamir area, concerns the validity of certain boundary treaties. Other problems, of unknown complexity and seriousness, involve the demarcation of land boundaries or their redemarcation where the original survey may be in question or boundary markers have disappeared.

NOTE: This paper was produced by the Office of Geographic and Cartographic Research and coordinated within the Directorate for Intelligence and with the Geographer, Department of State. Comments or questions may be directed to [redacted] Code 143, Extension 3057, or [redacted] Extension 3583.

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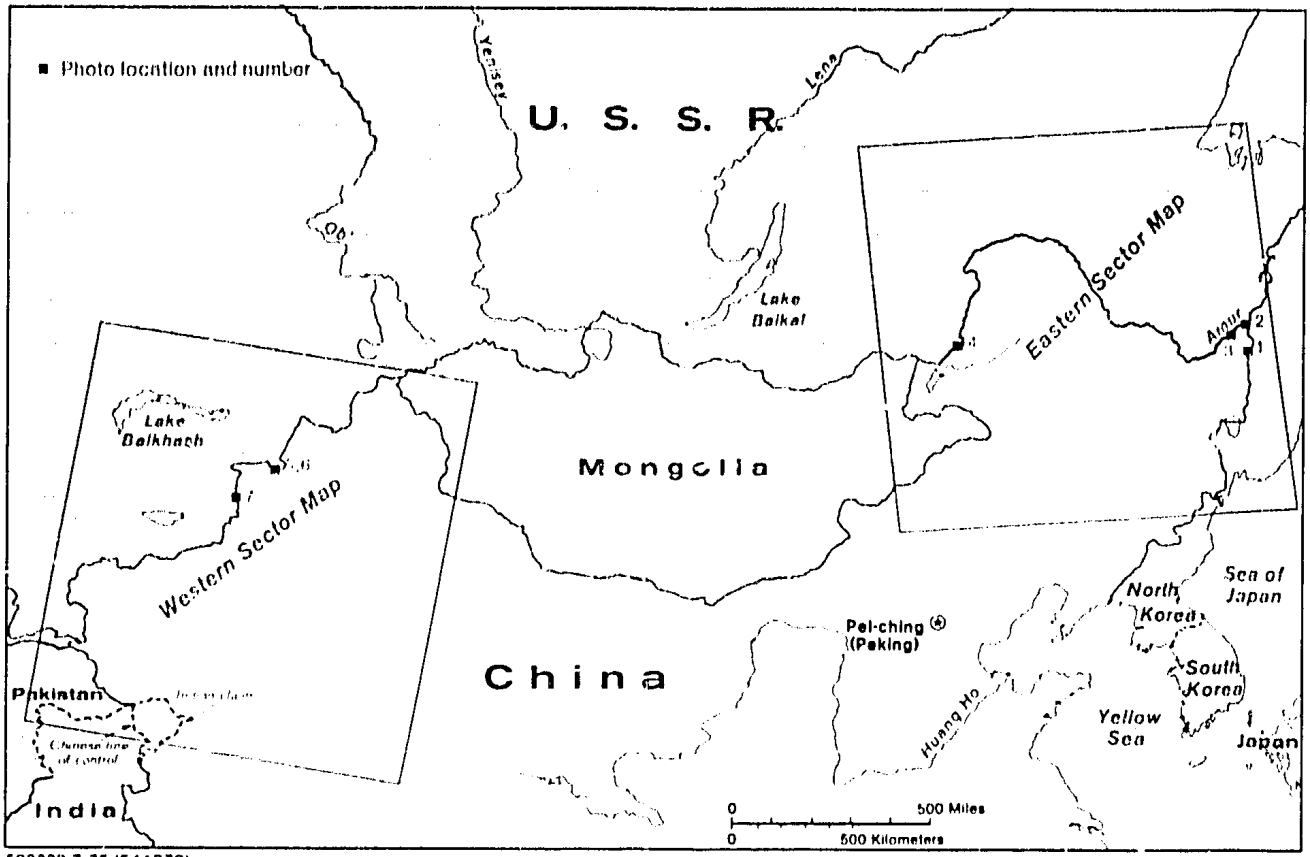
TABLE OF CONTENTS

PHOTOGRAPHS

MAPS

China–USSR Border Area



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Territorial Issues In The Sino-Soviet Dispute

Nearly all of the 6,700-kilometer Sino-Soviet boundary is based on 19th century treaties negotiated at a time when an expanding tsarist Russia came in contact with the distant outposts of a weakening Manchu China. Russia thereby acquired sizable territories—estimated by Peking to total 1½ million square kilometers—that since the 17th and 18th centuries had been under at least nominal Chinese control. The border region was unpopulated or sparsely inhabited by nomadic groups neither Russian nor Chinese.

Most of the 3,700-kilometer eastern part of the Sino-Soviet border is formed by the Amur and Ussuri Rivers. Except for a small segment at the extreme western end, the boundary was established by the Treaties of Aigun (1858) and Peking (1860). China claims that these treaties resulted in the loss of 1 million square kilometers of territory that had been acquired by the Treaty of Nerchinsk (Nipchu) in 1689. This treaty, which ended the initial Russian penetration and colonization of the Amur region, defined a boundary—as best as can be deciphered from the vague and imprecise description—that incorporated nearly all of the Amur Basin within China. During the intervening 170 years of Chinese ownership, however, the vast forest lands of the Amur-Ussuri territories were virtually unsettled and undeveloped by China and remained almost exclusively the domain of scattered Tungusic tribes.

One exception was a small Manchu-inhabited area, the "64 villages," located south of Blagoveshchensk on the left bank of the Amur. This area was specifically allocated to China by the Treaty of Aigun, but at the turn of the century a wave of anti-Chinese feeling in Russia resulted in the death of many of the Manchus and the forced removal of others across the Amur. Although occasionally mentioned by China in the past, it is not clear whether the Chinese have actively pressed the issue.

The mountainous 3,000-kilometer western section of the Sino-Soviet border divides the Chinese-ruled eastern fringe of traditionally Islamic Turkestan from the gigantic Soviet-controlled portion, which extends westward to the Caspian Sea. This boundary also, except for the southern segment, was defined by the Treaty of Peking. It was later demarcated in accordance with the Tarbagatay Treaty (1864) and apparently also the Treaty of Uliassuhai (1870) and modified by the Treaty of Ili (or St. Petersburg) in 1881. The southernmost segment, in the high Pamirs, was determined without Chinese participation by a British-Russian agreement in 1895, designed primarily to establish a buffer zone between British India and Russia.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Most of the economic development and settlement in the frontier region is on the Soviet side—a fact that does much to explain the futility of Peking's demands for a Soviet military withdrawal from the disputed territories. Along the eastern section, contrasts are particularly sharp and Soviet security interests most acute (Photo 1). On the Soviet side the Trans-Siberian Railroad closely parallels the border, connecting the cities of Blagoveshchensk (via a spur line), Khabarovsk, and Vladivostok with each other and with the western USSR; agriculture is important around these and other cities and along the middle Amur between the Bureya and Zeya Rivers and in the Khanka-Ussuri lowlands; and regionally significant industrial plants are located in the major urban centers. In contrast, the Chinese side of the frontier remains little developed and sparsely populated. Most of the small Chinese frontier towns and villages are directly connected only by the border rivers themselves; although most roads are oriented toward the Chinese interior, improvements in roads along the frontier have been made since the late 1960's.

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The contrasts between the two sides of the boundary are less sharp in the western section. Settlements and agricultural areas are scattered along both sides north of the Tien Shan; several of the more important ones lie in east-west stream valleys that cross the border. No sizable cities or major agricultural areas are located immediately adjacent to the boundary, and no major transportation routes parallel the border. Farther south, in the Tien Shan and other high mountain ranges, there is little permanent settlement or economic activity.

CURRENT NEGOTIATING POSITIONS

Since its enunciation in 1969, the unchanging basic negotiating position of Peking calls for the following:

- —As a precondition to an overall settlement, a preliminary agreement of mutual non-agression;
- —As a second precondition, withdrawal of armed forces from all disputed areas along the present de facto Sino-Soviet border—in effect, requiring withdrawal only by the USSR because it occupies virtually all of the disputed territory other than the uninhabited river islands;
- —Confirmation by the USSR that treaties relating to the present Sino-Soviet boundary are "unequal" and were imposed on China by "tsarist Russian imperialism"—although recently less stress apparently has been placed on this point;
- —Chinese willingness, nonetheless, to accept these treaties as the basis for an overall settlement of the Sino-Soviet boundary—an apparently deliberate display of Chinese reasonableness;
- —Return, subject to mutually agreed adjustments, of territories now occupied or under the control of either party in violation of these treaties—i.e., return by the USSR to China;
- —Conclusion of a more equitable Sino-Soviet treaty to replace the "unequal" treaties, and survey and demarcation of the boundary.

The USSR rejects the Chinese demand that military forces be withdrawn from all areas Peking claims to be in dispute. Moscow feels that a pullback from these areas would lend credence to the legitimacy of the Chinese position and predetermine the outcome of the negotiations. Soviet officials have softened their original adamant stand against relinquishing any territory to the Chinese and now offer to return some islands in the Amur and Ussuri to China. There is no hint, however, of any willingness to compromise on either the Chimnaya Island area or the Pamirs.

SPECIFIC TERRITORIAL PROBLEMS

UNDEFINED RIVERINE BOUNDARIES

Border Rivers and Their Islands

The most pressing territorial issue is the disposition of about 700 islands in the border rivers, none of which were allocated by the 19th century treaties. The initial 1964 Soviet negotiating position was that all of the Amur-Ussuri islands belonged to the USSR, but Moscow has gradually moderated its stand and offered to return some 400 islands to Chinese control. Although no evidence is in hand, the new position was probably reached after examining the islands' relationship to the deepest part of the main navigable channel, the thalweg—a widely recognized method of river boundary delimitation.

Generally, international boundaries along navigable rivers follow the thalweg, and the ownership of islands is determined accordingly. Should sudden changes occur in the alignment of the main channel, prevailing practice in international law is to leave the boundary where originally established even though water subsequently may cease to flow in that channel. In contrast, the boundary may be altered by gradual changes in the course of a border river—unless otherwise agreed by treaty.

Most of the Amur-Ussuri islands are small and low-lying, many are marshy or swampy, and some are little more than mud or sand banks. Some of the islands are inundated following spring breakup of river ice and after mid-summer rains, but relatively lush tree growth on many islands indicates that flooding is not prolonged. Although stream-

bed changes can occur quickly during flooding, the size and physical characteristics of the islands appear to change little. Indeed, the evidence is overwhelming that during the last 40 years the navigable channels have remained relatively stable. A comparison of Japanese navigation maps of the Amur—surveyed in the 1930's—with recent maps and photography indicates that no major realignments have occured. There has been some shoaling and deepening and minor alterations in the size and location of mud and sand banks, but these changes have not significantly altered the alignment of the thalweg.

Very few of the river islands are permanently inhabited, with the notable exception of Chimnaya; they serve as sources of hay and firewood and are visited from time to time by fishermen. Island settlements would in fact have no economic advantage over those on the river banks. An island settlement could be established for political reasons, but it would be both vulnerable to attack and difficult to supply. Even most of the border posts are located on the banks of the boundary rivers where logistical support can be more readily maintained. While island occupation might strengthen the claim of the occupying side, in the current atmosphere it would be a highly provocative act.

Chimnaya Island Area

Along the border rivers, the most contentious segment is the Chimnaya Island area, at the confluence of the Amur and Ussuri Rivers. This area has been the major territorial issue between Moscow and Peking since border talks began in 1964. The poorly drained triangular area, about 50 kilometers long and less than 12 kilometers wide, is comprised of two large islands, Chimnaya and Tarabarovskiy (together named Hei-hsia-tzu by the Chinese), and several smaller islands (Photo 2, foldout following Appendix). Along the southwest side is the 35-kilometer Kazakevicheva (Fu-yüan) Channel. The USSR considers this waterway, which connects the two rivers, to be the border.

Soviet occupation of strategically located Chimnaya Island reportedly took place in the early 1930's in response to growing tensions with Japan, then in occupation of Northeast China, and apparently has been continuous since then. The island is the site of a small shipyard—probably a subsidiary of one of the larger ones in Khabarovsk—for repair of river and small coastal vessels; it could also be used to build small craft. A permanent settlement adjoins the shipyard, and a few small agricultural settlements are found elsewhere on both Chimnaya and Tarabarovskiy Islands. Three border outposts front the Chinese "mainland" along the Kazakevicheva Channel.

A railroad line is being constructed across Chimnaya Island as a shortcut from the Trans-Siberian Railroad to the southern end of the Khabarovsk urban area. This expensive project, over marshy ground, is clear and current evidence of the Soviet rejection of Chinese claims. Rails were laid across the ice from Khabarovsk to Chimnaya during the winter of 1972-73, three dredges were moved to the island, and a foundation for two large POL tanks was prepared. Subsequently, construction began on a railroad embankment on Chimnaya, using materials dredged from nearby channels, the POL tanks were erected, and additional construction support equipment was moved to the island. Across the Amur River to the north, a railbed was prepared leading from an existing spur of the Trans-Siberian Railroad to the bank of the river; at Khabarovsk a causeway aligned with another spur of the same railroad and with the embankment on Chimnaya was built out into the Ussuri.

Since the summer of 1974, the embankment on Chimnaya has been extended, with one segment now directly aligned with the railbed on the north bank of the Amur. More equipment and facilities have been moved to the island, and additional construction activity—the purpose of some of which is not clear—has been initiated. Recent upgrading of military defenses further indicates Soviet intentions to retain these islands.

Use of the thalweg principle to define the boundary would allocate the Chimnaya Island area to China, but the overriding factor in the dispute—regardless of the legal merits—is the strategic location of the islands in relation to Khabarovsk. Non-Soviet control of the island complex would be a threat to the security of the city and the Amur River crossing of the Trans-Siberian Railroad. This vital supply line will remain vulnerable even after

completion of the second Trans-Siberian Railroad—the Baykal-Amur Magistral' (BAM)—a decade or more hence, since no alternative rail route exists or is planned between Khabarovsk and Vladivostok.

Seasonal shoaling of the Kazakevicheva Channel occurs during low water stages that normally extend from late June until late July and again from about the beginning of September until freezeup in early November. This shoaling has not posed any significant economic loss for the Chinese because little cargo has ever been shipped between the Amur and Ussuri Rivers during the navigation season, which extends from about the first of May until late October. Each year the Chinese announce their intentions to sail, during the low water periods, around the east end of Chimnaya along what China regards as the international boundary. Soviet authorities counter by claiming that the Amur and Ussuri in this area are USSR inland waters, and that the Kazakevicheva Channel forms the international boundary. Since 1973, the USSR has offered to assist in deepening the channel—a ploy the Chinese predictably ignore because acceptance would imply recognition of the channel as the de facto boundary. Whatever the relative merits of the Soviet and Chinese positions, continuation of the status quo appears necessary to protect Soviet security interests at Khabarovsk. Settlement of the sovereignty question for nearly all of the other islands can likely be based on the thalweg formula, but the USSR will never agree to its application in the Chimnaya Island area.

Other Disputed Islands

The sovereignty of other Amur-Ussuri islands, including the well known Chen-pao (Damanskiy) and Pa-ch'a (Photo 3), has been disputed. Adherence to the thalweg principle would allocate to China all disputed islands whose locations have been determined. Sensitivity to direct observation from several islands lying opposite USSR settlements probably accounts for Soviet claims to these particular islands. In most cases, however, there appears to be no specific security interest responsible for the Soviet position.

Another boundary segment that may cause a problem is the upper Argun above Priargunsk; it has been shown differently on Soviet and Chinese maps. The upper Argun flows in numerous braided channels through a marshy flood plain as much as 10 kilometers wide (Photo 4). Generally, the Soviet maps show the boundary along the easternmost channel and the Chinese maps portray it along the westernmost. During periods of high water the channels may shift within the flood plain; comparison of recent maps with Japanese maps compiled in the early 1940's indicates that some channels have shifted. Technical problems could easily arise when actual boundary demarcation is undertaken because of the physical character of the river and the difficulty in agreeing on its main channel, but this boundary segment seems unlikely to become a major issue.

No conflicting claims have been publicly voiced by either party along the lower Argun River, on Lake Khanka, or along the Sungacha River, which connects Lake Khanka with the Ussuri. Allocation of islands in these rivers has never been agreed, however, and there is a possibility of this issue being raised at some future date.

BOUNDARY AGREEMENTS AT ISSUE

Pamirs

The Chinese claim of some 41,000 square kilometers in the Pamirs* apparently is based mainly on 18th century Manchu military operations. In 1895 the boundary in the Pamirs was determined, without direct Chinese participation, by a British-Russian agreement designed primarily to define the border between British India and Russia. Some sources refer to an acceptance of the Pamir boundary as a de facto line in an 1894 Sino-Russian exchange of notes, but this correspondence has never been found. Although Chinese maps depict the de facto boundary in this sector, it is labeled "indefinite"—the only sector of the entire border so designated.

No subsequent Chinese government has accepted the Pamir boundary, and protests were voiced immediately after the 1895 agreement was signed. From time to time Chinese maps have shown vary-

*A "pamir" literally is a high, treeless, glaciated valley filled with glacial debris and rimmed by higher snow-crowned ridges. The Pamirs are made up of a number of such valleys and ridges.

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ing but sizable areas in the Pamirs as part of China. The Chinese are probably less concerned with the border alignment itself than with its origin, which they consider defective because no Chinese officials participated in it.

The Pamirs seem an unlikely area to be coveted; the region includes the highest mountains in the USSR, with elevations over 7,000 meters. Most of the Pamirs are uninhabited except for small concentrations of people who practice irrigated farming in the broader stream valleys. The coal and other mineral deposits have gone unexploited because of their inaccessability. The extensive Pamir snowfields provide abundant water to irrigate the cotton growing areas of Soviet Central Asia to the west, and ambitious Soviet plans call for construction of large hydroelectric power plants utilizing the water in the swift flowing rivers.

Man-chou-li Area

The border segment between the Argun River and the China-USSR Mongolia tripoint might prove troublesome—although there is no direct evidence that this has been a contentious issue. Soviet maps show the boundary as much as 21 kilometers south of the alignment depicted by the Chinese, leaving about 900 square kilometers of territory between the two lines. This tract is strategically significant because it lies across the major approach from the USSR into Northeast China. The Soviet version apparently has served as the de facto boundary ever since the Tsitsihar Agreement was signed by a moribund Manchu government in 1911. This agreement is of questionable legality, however, because it was never ratified by any Chinese government; the Chinese continue, therefore, to portray the boundary cartographically on the basis of the Treaty of Kiakhta (1727).

LAND BOUNDARIES REQUIRING DEMARCATION OR REDEMARCATION

Western Sector

The 3,000-kilometer western part of the border, with the exception of the Pamir region, was defined in the second half of the 19th century by two sets of treaties between the Russian and Chinese Governments. Although the Chinese claim to have lost about 440,000 square kilometers of territory as a result of the Treaty of Peking (1860), they have no realistic expectations of recovering it. (According to Peking, the boundary should have been drawn to connect the westernmost mobile pickets established by Manchu China to regulate use of pastures by nomadic Kazakhs in Central Asia. Soviet authorities, in turn, claim that the 1860 boundary is correct since it follows the line of permanent Chinese outposts, which were located considerably east of the maximum Chinese claim.) The 1881 Treaty of Ili transferred an additional 70,000 square kilometers from the Lake Zaysan, Ili, and other areas to Russia.

Aside from the Pamir tract, no other disputed area is known to exist along the western border—despite its length and the disappearance of 19th century boundary markers. The boundary appears to be well known to local inhabitants in the relatively few areas where the frontier is permanently settled and major routes cross the boundary. However several border incidents have occurred in the past, and it is possible that additional disputes could arise once negotiations reach the stage of establishing a precise alignment.

The physical character of the border and the ethnic composition of the frontier area could create additional problems in reaching a final boundary agreement. North of the Pamirs a number of natural corridors, primarily river valleys, cross the boundary. The most important is the Dzungarian Gate, connecting Kazakhstan and Sinkiang Province (Photos 5 and 6). Other important corridors are the valleys of the Tekes, Ili (Photo 7), Emel', and Chernyy (Black) Irtysh Rivers. It was through the Dzungarian Gate that Moscow and Peking planned to link their Turkestan railroad systems. Although the Russians completed track-laying in 1958 to the border town of Druzhba ("friendship" in Russian, but actually an armed camp), the Chinese halted construction at Wu-lu-mu-ch'i (Urumchi) in the early 1960's as the Sino-Soviet dispute deepened.

The border has never been a barrier to the various ethnic groups inhabiting the grasslands and valleys of the USSR-China frontier. Kazakhs, Uighurs, and Kirgiz live on both sides; other Central Asian ethnic groups have a vast majority in one or the other country. Slavs, primarily Russians

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and Ukrainians, have moved into urban areas near the frontier. Similarly, large numbers of Han Chinese have migrated into Sinkiang during the past two decades; many have been settled in rural areas to work on land reclamation projects, a few of which are located near the border.

The presence of a single ethnic group along both sides of the Sino-Soviet border is a source of border incidents. The most notable example was the exodus of 40,000 Kazakhs and Uighurs from Sinkiang in 1962. This incident developed as a result of the temporary liberalization by the Chinese of their emigration regulations and the consequent escalation of efforts by minority peoples in great numbers to cross over into the Soviet Union. When the Chinese officials changed their minds they brutally suppressed those who still insisted on emigrating to the USSR. Since then tighter controls and improved economic conditions in Sinkiang have reduced transborder movement. The USSR continues to beam anti-Chinese broadcasts to Sinkiang Uighurs; the broadcasts appear to be only another facet of the overall dispute, however, rather than a serious attempt to foment a genuine separatist movement.

Lake Khanka to Tumen River

The 550-kilometer boundary between Lake Khanka and the North Korea-USSR-China tripoint at the Tumen River was twice demarcated in the late 19th century. The precision with which the boundary is depicted on recent Soviet maps contrasts with the relatively generalized delineation on Chinese maps. This may simply reflect a need for redemarcation of the border in this generally hilly and lightly populated sector where, in many areas, the boundary follows no easily recognizable terrain features. Undoubtedly many of the 37 markers erected in 1886 have deteriorated, become overgrown, or have been destroyed. No territorial disagreement between China and the USSR has been documented along this sector of the border, but previous border clashes between Soviet and Japanese troops in the 1930's and alleged Soviet-instigated transborder incidents in 1969 suggest an unclear demarcation of the boundary. In recent years vegetation has been cleared along several segments of the boundary, thus making it easy to identify; in other areas, however, the boundary is less identifiable where vegetation has been allowed to regrow or has never been cleared.

PROSPECTS

Until relations between the two countries improve, a resolution of the border dispute is unlikely. Although border talks continue to be held intermittently, no credible evidence is available to suggest that Peking and Moscow are now close to concluding a settlement.

The greatest problem area is still Chimnaya. Even though the Chinese case for sovereignty over the island tract appears to be supported by both the treaties and the geographic factors, strong Soviet security interests are involved. Although the Pamir segment is also important, China's claim appears less legitimate. It seems unlikely that the Chinese will press it as vociferously—not only because it is improbable that the USSR will withdraw from such a large tract but also because continued demands would expose Chinese unreasonableness and thus be politically infeasible. None of the other disputed tracts appears to pose as great a problem: in many cases the major task involved is demarcation or redemarcation of the boundary; many small islands in the frontier rivers, though, would change hands following a border delimitation. In sum, the total territorial exchange in any future border settlement is likely to be extremely small.

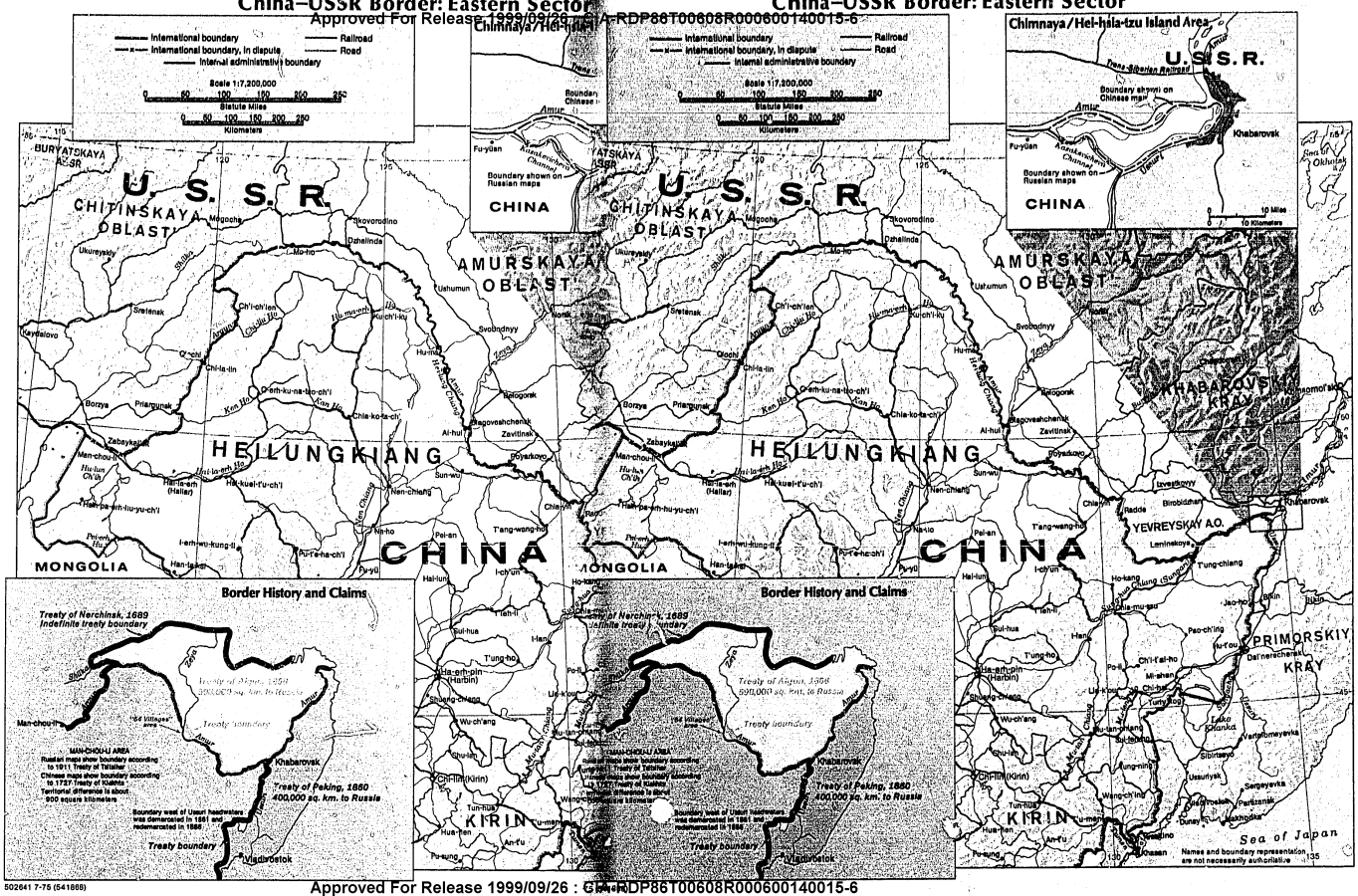
The initiative for reaching a border settlement appears to rest with the Chinese, who, despite their self-proclaimed desire to reach an agreement, rigidly adhere to their 1969 negotiating stance, which is still totally unacceptable to the USSR. Continuing polemical exchanges and the intransigence of the Chinese suggest that future border talks, at least until major leadership changes occur in the PRC, will continue to be protracted and at times acrimonious.

APPENDIX

TERRITORIAL PROBLEMS ALONG THE SINO-SOVIET BORDER

Territory and Applicable Treaties	Nature of Problem
UNDEFINED RIVERINE BOUNDARY	
Chimnaya Island Area (Hei-hsia-tzu) (325 km²/125 mi²) Treaty of Aigun (1858) Treaty of Peking (1860)	Neither treaty allocated these islands, opposite Khabarovsk at the confluence of the Amur and Ussuri Rivers.
Amur-Ussuri Islands Treaty of Aigun (1858) Treaty of Peking (1860)	Neither treaty allocated the more than 700 islands in the Amur and Ussuri Rivers.
Upper Argun River Flood Plain (285 km²/110 mi²) Treaty of Nerchinsk (1689) also, for Man-chou-li vicinity only Treaty of Kiakhta (1727) Tsitsihar Agreement (1911)	Continuing shifts in channels pose practical difficulties in demarcation of boundary. Generally, Chinese maps show boundary along westernmost channel whereas Soviet maps depict it along easternmost channel.
BOUNDARY AGREEMENT AT ISSUE	
Pamirs (41,000 km²/16,000 mi²) Bilateral Agreement between Russia and Great Britain (1895)	The Chinese were not a party to the treaty, and the tract, in possession of the USSR, has never been recognized by subsequent Chinese regimes as belonging to the Soviet Union.
Man-chou-li Area (900 km²/350 mi²) Treaty of Kiakhta (1727) Tsitsihar Agreement (1911)	The Soviet Union bases its delimitation of the boundary between the Argun River and the Sino-Soviet-Mongolian tripoint on the Tsitsihar Agreement, which no Chinese government has ratified. This boundary is 8 to 16 kilometers south of the Chinese alignment based on the Treaty of Kiakhta.
LAND BOUNDARY REQUIRING DEMARCATION OR REDEMARCATION	
Western Sector (3,000 km/1,850 mi) Treaty of Peking (1860) Treaty of Ili (1881)	Chinese claim the loss of 440,000 square kilometers based on the westernmost extension of mobile pickets sent to regulate use of pastures by nomads in Central Asia. The USSR maintains that the boundary is correctly demarcated on the basis of permanent Chinese outposts.
Lake Khanka to Tumen River (550 km/340 mi) Treaty of Peking (1860)	Twice demarcated during the last half of the 19th century; the difference in the degree of precision with which the boundary is depicted on recent Soviet maps in comparison with the relatively generalized delineation shown on recent Chinese maps suggests a need for redemarcation.

China–USSR Border: Eastern Sector



China–USSR Border: Eastern Sector

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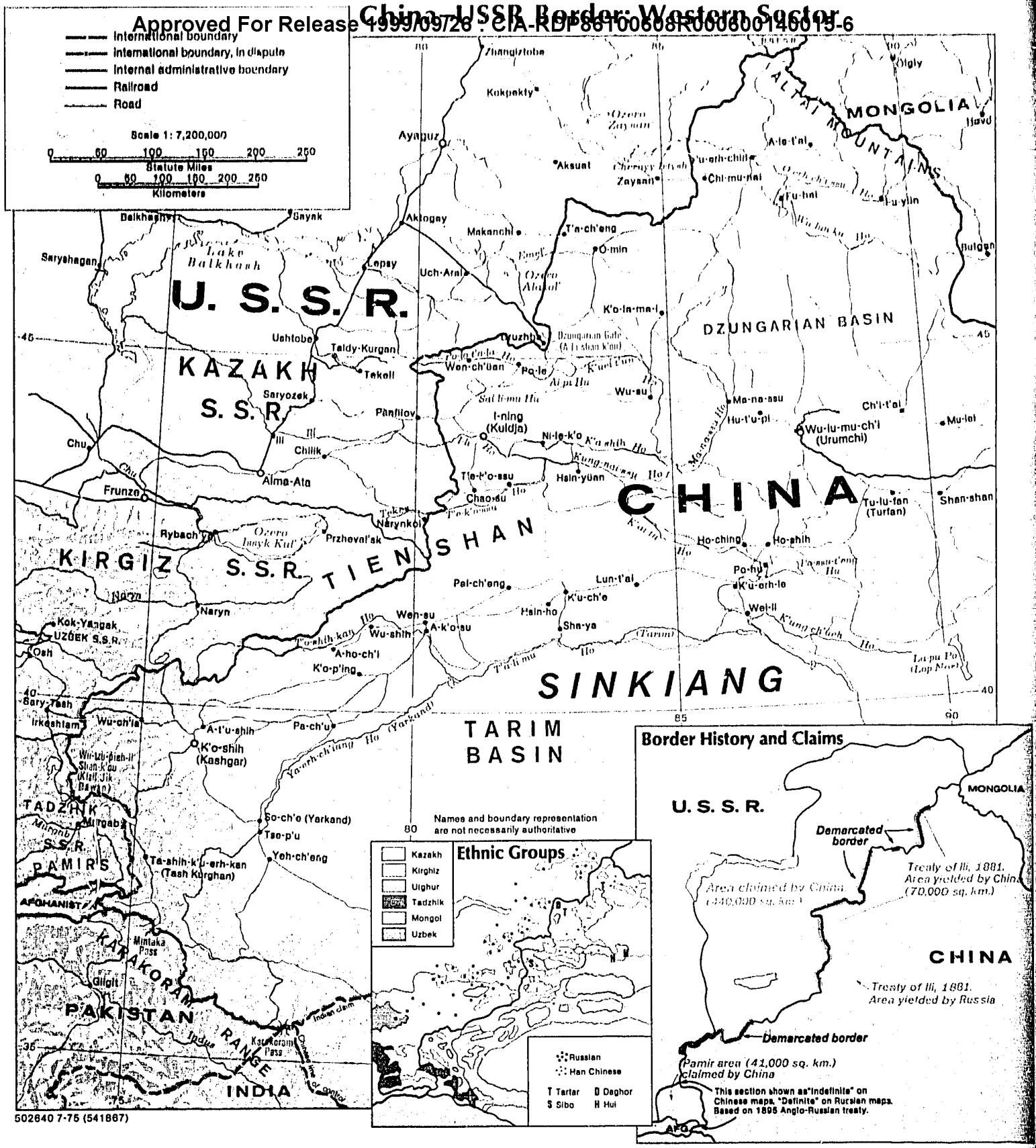
China–USSR Border: Western Sector



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